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ENGLISH *FEMMES SAVANTES* AT THE END OF THE
SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

Those whose interest in questions relating to the equality of the sexes carries them backward as well as forward, have heretofore placed little emphasis on English thought at the end of the Seventeenth Century. They are usually content to associate that period with the activities of Mary Astell; and are much inclined, on the uncertain statement of her original biographer Ballard,¹ to accept as her significant work in this connection *An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex*, first printed in 1696. The significance of the *Essay* is indeed beyond dispute. But this becomes fully apparent upon consideration of the tract, not as an almost unique utterance, but in relation to the more accredited writings of Mrs. Astell, and to the mass of kindred literature then appearing in England.² As such a study proceeds, the probability of Mrs. Astell's connection with the book in question decreases, and she and the unknown author come to represent parallel developments in a large and well-defined movement, an early "liberation-war" of the sex.

There were ample reasons for such a wide-spread movement at this time. Since the Stuart Restoration, society about

¹ George Ballard, *Memoirs of British Ladies*, London, 1752; 2nd ed. 1775. On p. 309 (ed. 1775) he mentions "a witty piece, commonly ascribed to her, intitled, *An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex*." The *Biographia Britannica*, Vol. VI (1763) follows Ballard closely in all other details, but ascribes this book to her without question (p. 3713); as does also the *New Biographical Dictionary*, 1798. Nichols, in his *Literary Anecdotes*, 1812 (Vol. IV, p. 261), ventures a correction on Ballard's list of her works, but makes no mention of the *Essay*. Watt's *Bibliotheca Britannica* includes the book among her works. More recently, the *Dictionary of National Biography* has omitted mention of it: but it is accepted as Mrs. Astell's in the *British Museum Catalogue*; by Mrs. Mc. Ilquham, in an article, "Mary Astell," in *Westminster Review*, CXLIX, 440 ff. (April, 1898); and by Prof. Trent, in the *Cyclopedia of Education*, 1911 (s. "Mary Astell").

² Mrs. Mc. Ilquham's "Mary Astell," just cited, despite numerous inaccuracies and a somewhat militant tone, is of value in so far as it recognizes the existence of this larger movement.

the English court had imitated and enlarged upon the most dissolute indulgences of French court-life, and established for woman a status that found constant expression in popular comedy and current satire—that of a shrewd, designing, deceptive and inconstant creature, parading her physical attractions, and bartering them in gratification of the lowest passions.³ This assumption, accepted so generally that women themselves, like Mrs. Behn and Mrs. Centlivre, lent their talents to the celebration of it, necessarily aroused numerous righteous protests, and set the serious-minded of both sexes to studying and advocating the positive virtues of noble women of the past. France, fortunately, afforded contemporary examples of good as well as of evil, although her refining influence had been appearing only in disconnected instances or those where there was open compromise with vices. The Duchess of Newcastle had on rare occasions brought her prudery and learned affectations out of the country, to gratify London curiosity.⁴ The Matchless Orinda had perished in her prime, and no one in

³ *e. g.*—(1) "Our reputation! Lord, why should you not think that we women make use of our reputation, as you men of yours, only to deceive the world with less suspicion? Our virtue is like the statesman's religion, the quaker's word, the gamester's oath, and the great man's honour; but to cheat those that trust us."—Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, Act V, sc. 4.

(2) "A *virtuous* Mistress! Death, what a thing thou hast found out for me! why what the Devil should I do with a virtuous Woman?—a sort of ill-natured Creatures, that take a Pride to torment a Lover. *Virtue* is but an infirmity in Women, a Disease that renders even the handsom ungrateful; whilst the ill-favour'd for want of Sollicitations and Address, only fancy themselves so."—Mrs. Behn, *The Rover*, Act IV, sc. 1.

(3) "Things are so inverted, that ladies who were honest all their youth to be like their mothers, turn lewd in their old age to be like their daughters. There never was such an open and general war made on virtue: young ones of thirteen will pickeere at it, and by that time they are twenty, they are risen to be strumpets-general, and march in public with their baggage, with miss and mass, and nurse and maid, and a whole train of reformed sinners, expecting the next cully that falls."—Crowne, *Sir Courtly Nice*, Act I.

⁴ Cf. Samuel Pepys, *Diary*, April 11, 26; May 1, 10, 30, 1667; John Evelyn, *Memoirs*, April 18, 27; May 30, 1667; and his letter to Mr. Bohun on occasion of the same visit, *Diary and Correspondence*, Bohun ed., IV, 8-9.

Wales or Ireland ventured to assume the responsibilities of her coteries. Mme. Mazarin, who came to England in 1675, and gathered English wits and French expatriates into her new establishment in London, had refinement and *esprit*, but was overfond of gayety and the gaming-table.⁵ This same disparity of interests apparently characterized all the fashionable *ruelles* maintained by English ladies.⁶ Mrs. Behn, after all, seems to have had the most success with the role of *précieuse*, seriously interpreted. She wrote fiction, as did Mlle. de Scudéry, and wove herself into the story and colored the facts of her life with romance, after the approved manner. She professed to be in touch with affairs of state, indulged her fancy in affected correspondence,⁷ and—under the name of Astrea—had indeed her coterie or “cabal,”⁸ whose experiences are celebrated in her *Poems*, 1684. She died just as the Revolution of 1688 gave the cause of women fresh dignity and emphasis. With Mary on the throne, and the Princess Anne soon recalled to court, the advocates of larger privilege and deeper respect for the sex were free to go campaigning at will.

The extent of their activities is indicated by the fact that a search by no means exhaustive, and based in great part on the *Term Catalogues*, reveals more than fifty related titles in the last thirty years of the century, increasing in number and importance as the period proceeds. In most cases these titles are so explicit that even where the books are inaccessible, they may be assigned their proper place in a rough system of classification, which aims chiefly to get several types of work properly subordinated to the important treatises.

Comparatively few of the documents are religious in their purpose, the most important being *The Ladies' Calling*, first

⁵ Cf. Saint-Évremond, *Œuvres Choiesies*, ed. Gidel, pp. 384ff.

⁶ The prevalence of these *ruelles* by 1697 is attested by the statement in Dryden's *Dedication of the Æneis, Essays*, ed. Ker, II, 161.

⁷ Cf. *The History of the Life and Memoirs of Mrs. Aphra Behn*, “written by one of the Fair Sex” and prefixed to her collected works in 1735.

⁸ Cf. her poem with this title, and the list of assumed names it contains (*Poems*, p. 33). An analysis of the volume is given by P. Siegel, in *Anglia*, XXV, 109ff.

published as early as 1673; *The Excellent Woman described by her true characters and their opposites*, by the Rev. Theophilus Dorrington (1692); and *The Female's Legacy*, in 1699, described as "written by Mrs. Amey Hayward, of Lemington in Hampshire." The first of these, whose authorship is still under discussion,⁹ was popular enough to justify seven editions by 1700. Both the others were promptly reprinted. The list might be much extended by printed sermons addressed primarily to women, and by a number of volumes of Meditations, Moral Essays, and the like, chiefly unpublished, described by Ballard in his *Memoirs of British Ladies*.¹⁰ While the whole group follows conventional lines, there is significance in the fact that certain of the writers—for example, Lady Gethin, Lady Halket, Elizabeth Bury, and Lady Pakington, if she may be included—were themselves women of broad culture, to whom piety was no longer the harmless pastime of ignorance the divines had been inclined to make it.¹¹

A second, more comprehensive group offers also much that is conventional, but is full of suggestion. This includes the compendia of various sorts, made up to attract a none-too-discriminating public, and usually thrown together by publishers' hacks. Hand-books of social procedure are much in evidence, some of them translations and revisions from a much earlier time. Thus Walter Montagu's *The Accomplished Woman*, translated from the French in 1656, was reprinted in 1671; and there were various editions of *The Ladies' Behaviour, or the Arts of Affectation*, described as "written originally in Italian, above an hundred and fifty years ago."¹²

⁹ This is one of the series of books each described as "By the Author of *The Whole Duty of Man*"—itself anonymous. They have been variously ascribed to Lady Pakington, Archbishop Sterne, Richard Allstree, et al. Cf. Ballard, *op. cit.*, pp. 221-232; Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, II, 597-604; C. E. Doble, articles in *The Academy*, Nov., 1882; *Dict. Nat. Biog.*, s. "Lady Dorothy Pakington."

¹⁰ e. g., pp. 242, 254, 258-262, 272, 295.

¹¹ Cf. the sentiments expressed by the Parson, in Lady Chudleigh's *The Ladies Defence*, 1701.

¹² Noted in *Term Catalogues*, Mich., 1692, and Trin., 1693. Cf. Etheredge, *The Man of Mode*, 1676, where Medley is commenting on new books (Act II, sc. 1):—"Then there is *The Art of Affectation*, writ-

About 1683 came a marked revival of historical catalogues of distinguished women, usually accompanied by a "vindication" of the sex—the medieval tradition transmitted to modern times by Cornelius Agrippa, and written down to the level of a one-shilling purchaser. Two parallel titles from 1683 may be illuminating:¹³

Hæc et Hic, or The Feminine Gender more worthy than the Masculine. Being a Vindication of that ingenious and innocent Sex from the biting Sarcasms, bitter Satyrs, and opprobrious Calumnies, wherewith they are daily, though undeservedly, aspersed by the virulent Tongues and Pens of malevolent Men; with many Examples of the rare Virtues of that Noble Sex, in which they have not only equalled, but excelled most of the other Sex. [*Term Cat.*, Trin., 1683].

The Accomplished Lady, or Deserving Gentlewoman; being a vindication of innocent and harmless Females from the aspersions of malicious men. Wherein are contained many eminent examples of the Constancy, Chastity, Prudence, Policy, Valour, Learning, etc., wherein they have not only equalled, but excelled, many of the contrary Sex. [*Term Cat.*, Mich., 1683].

In *Female Excellency, or the Ladies Glory*, 1688 and 1690, the illustrious examples are reduced to a list of "nine worthies"—Deborah, Judith, Esther, Susanna, Lucretia, Boadicea, Mariamne, Clotilda, and Andegona^{13a}—while the *Ladies' Dic-*

ten by a late beauty of quality, teaching you how to draw up your breasts, stretch up your neck, to thrust out your breech, to play with your head, to toss up your nose, to bite your lips, to turn up your eyes, to speak in a silly soft tone of a voice, and use all the foolish French words that will infallibly make your person and conversation charming, with a short apology at the latter end, in the behalf of young ladies who notoriously wash and paint, though they have naturally good complexions." By 1682 there were three editions of Hannah Wolley's *The Gentlewoman's Companion, or a Guide to the Female Sex: containing directions of behaviour in all places, companies, relations, and conditions, from their childhood down to old age*.

¹³ Cf. also *The Wonders of the Female World, or A general History of Women*, 1683 and 1684; *The Illustrious History of Women, or A Compendium of them*, by J. Shirley, 1686 and 1702; and J. Innes's translation, in 1681, of M. de Scudéry's *Les Femmes illustres, ou les Harangues héroïques*.

^{13a} Prof. Carleton Brown has called my attention to an essentially different list in Robert Chester's *Love's Martyr*, 1601. This follows the

tionary, 1694, opens its pages to "women of all descriptions, from Cleopatra to Godiva." Moreover, the virtues of these heroines promptly intruded upon the earlier hand-books of courtesy, a combination so clearly meant for respectable housewives that the thoughtful publisher added some details still more practical, with results like this:¹⁴

The whole Duty of a Woman, or A Guide to the Female Sex, from the Age of 16 to 60; being directions how Women of all Conditions ought to behave themselves for Obtaining present and future Happiness. Directions to obtain the Virtues of Piety, Meekness, Modesty, Chastity, Humility, Compassion, Temperance, and Affability; and how to avoid opposite vices. 2. The duty of Virgins, directing what they ought to do and to avoid, for gaining all the Accomplishments of the Sex; with the whole Art of Love etc. The whole duty of a Wife. The whole duty of a Widow, etc. Also Receipts in Physick and Surgery; with the Art of Cookery, Preserving, Candying, Beautifying, etc. Written by a Lady. [The Second Edition, *Term Cat.*, Trin., 1697].

Still more closely related to the movement is a group of satires and rejoinders; the former much in the spirit of the comedies, the latter prompt and spirited, but in most cases content to turn the indictments back upon the authors of them. The object of attack is usually the woman of society in her various aspects. Most frequently she is berated for her traditional faults of pride, lust, and inconstancy,¹⁵ as in Robert Gould's *Love Given Over*, which kept apologists busy for more

conventional grouping of the male worthies—three Pagans, three Jews, and three Christians—and includes the following: Minerva, Semiramis, Tomyris, Jahel, Deborah, Judith, Maud of Anjou, Elizabeth of Aragon, Joanna of Naples. (ed. Grosart, Pub. New Shaks. Soc., VIII, 2, pp. 37-40).

¹⁴ Equally heterogeneous are the contents of *The Accomplished Female Instructor*, first issued in 1704.

¹⁵ *The Arraignment of lewd, idle, froward, and inconstant Women: or the Vanity of them*, a tract dating from 1615, was reprinted in 1682. Substantially the same vices are mildly satirized in *Several Discourses and Characters Addressed to the Ladies of the Age*, 1689. This document, by "a Person of Honour," has the added interest of being "Written at the Request of a Lady."

than twenty years.¹⁶ At times the ridicule is extended to the refinements of her arts: to her little hypocrisies, as in the dialogue *Naked Truth*, where one of the speakers is "a precious Saint-like Sister called Terpole;"¹⁷ to intimate details of dress and language, as in John—or rather, Mary—Evelyn's *Mundus Muliebris*, with its accompanying *Fop's Dictionary*;¹⁸ to her ever-recurring ambition for power, represented in the various "Parliaments of Women" begun as early as 1646.¹⁹ On a lower social level are such commonplaces as

¹⁶ This satire appeared anonymously in 1680 and was frequently reprinted. In 1703 it was published with Gould's *Satire against Wooing*, with his name on the title-page; nevertheless it has been often assigned to Tom Brown. Cf. from the *Brit. Mus. Cat.*—"A Satyr against Wooing: with a view of the ill consequences that attend it...Written by the author of the Satyr against Woman [T. Brown]. pp. 23, London, 1698. 4°. The dedication is signed R. G." Replies to this satire include the following:

The Female Advocate, or An answer to a late Satyr against the Pride, Lust, and Inconstancy, etc., of Women. Really written by a Lady in Vindication of her Sex. Two eds. in 1686.

Sylvia's Revenge, or a Satyr against Man: in answer to the 'Satyr against Woman,' 1688.

The lost Maidenhead, or Sylvia's Farewell to Love. A New Satyr against Man, 1691.

The Folly of Love, or An Essay upon the Satyr against Woman, 1691.

The pleasures of Love and Marriage. A Poem in praise of the Fair Sex: in requital for 'The Folly of Love,' and some other late Satyrs on Women. 1691.

¹⁷ *Naked Truth, or A plain discovery of the Intrigues of Amorous Fops and Humours of several other whimsical persons, in a pleasant and profitable Dialogue between a precious Saint-like Sister called Terpole, and Mimologus, a Scoffing Buffoon.* (*Term Cat.*, Easter, 1673 Cf. also Mich., 1704).

¹⁸ Cf. Evelyn, *Diary*, March 10, 1685. This also produced a prompt reply in kind:—*Mundus Foppensis, or the Fop displayed: being the Ladies vindication: in answer to 'Mundus Muliebris, etc.; in Burlesque.' With a Supplement to the 'Fop Dictionary,' for the use of the Town Beaus.* (*Term Cat.*, Mich. 1690).

¹⁹ Cf. Lowndes, *Bibliographer's Manual*, Bohn ed., p. 1286; and *Cambridge History of Literature*, VII, 572. *Term Cat.*, Mich., 1684, notes: *The Parliament of Women, or A compleat History of the Proceedings and Debates of a perticular Juncto of Ladies and Gentlewomen, with a design to alter the Government of the World: by way of Satyr.* The appearance of D'Urfey's play *A Commonwealth of Women* in 1685 is to be noted.

The Women's Fegaries, showing the great endeavours they have used for obtaining of the breeches, 1675, and Ned. Ward's *Female Policy Detected* (1695), dedicated to the Apprentices of London.²⁰

There still remains an imposing list of more significant works, as follows:

- 1670. *Female pre-eminence, or the Dignity and Excellency of that Sex*. Written originally in Latin by Henricus Cornelius Agrippa, and now Englished [by H. C.]
- 1673. *An Essay to revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen in Religion, Manners, Arts and Tongues*. By Mrs. Bathsua Makin.
- 1674. *A friendly Apology in behalf of the Woman's excellency; together with some examples of Women Worthies*. Written in Verse by J. Golborne, sometime fellow of Trinity College.
- 1677. *The Woman as good as the Man: or the Equality of both Sexes*. Written in French [by F. Poulain de la Barre] and translated . . . by A. L.
- 1678. *Advice to the Women and Maidens of London* . . . to apply themselves to the right understanding and practice of keeping Books of Accounts. By one of that sex.
- 1685. *A Commonwealth of Women*. A Play, by T. D'Urfey.
- 1691. *A Dialogue concerning Women, being a defence of the Sex, addressed to Eugenia*. By William Walsh [Preface by Dryden].
- 1692. *A Present for the Ladies: being an Historical Vindication of the Female Sex*. To which is added, *The Character of an Accomplished Virgin, Wife, and Widow*. By Nahum Tate. 2nd ed. 1693.
- 1693. *The Female Virtuosoës*. A Comedy, by T. Wright.
- 1694. *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, for the advancement of their true and greatest interest*. By a Lover of her Sex [Mary Astell].
- 1695. *Letters concerning the Love of God, between the Author of the Proposal to the Ladies and J. Norris*. 2nd ed. 1705.

²⁰ Apparently of the same stratum is *The great Advocate and Orator for Women, or the Arraignment, Tryal, and Conviction of such wicked Husbands (or Monsters) who hold it lawful to beat their Wives, or to demean themselves severely and tyrannically towards them*. (*Term Cat.*, Mich., 1682).

1696. An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex. In which are inserted the Characters of a Pedant, a Squire, a Beau, etc. Written by a Lady. 3rd ed. 1697.
1697. A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, Part Second; wherein a Method is offered for the Improvement of their Minds. 4th ed. of the two parts, 1701.
1697. An Essay upon Projects. By Daniel Defoe.
1697. The Female Wits: or, The Triumvirate of Poets at Rehearsal. A Comedy.
1698. The Education of Young Gentlewomen. Written originally in French. Translated . . . and improved, by a Lady of Quality.^{20a}
1700. Some Reflections upon Marriage. By Mary Astell. 2nd ed. 1703, 3rd 1706.
1701. The Ladies Defence: or, The Bride-Woman's Counsellor Answer'd. Written by a Lady [Lady Mary Chudleigh].
1705. A Legacy for the Ladies, or Characters of the Women of the Age. By Tom Brown.

The first two documents in this list, both of them in their way revivals, afford a basis for interpretation of the entire activity. One is at least the third English rendering of a work common in French versions, and originally composed in Latin early in the 16th Century—the rhetorical *tour de force* of a scholar who would compliment a learned royal patroness.²¹ With much parade of authorities, the author argues that there is no sex-distinction in souls; nor in the powers of reason and imagination. In certain respects, indeed, women are distinctly superior: in native modesty, in facility of expression, and in the seductiveness of their beauty. To support this theorizing, appears—as already noted—a long muster-roll of illustrious women of antiquity, eminent in social and governmental affairs. The other document is a modest pam-

^{20a} This rather vague title is not easily identified. Several possibilities suggest themselves, notably F. P. de la Barre's *De l'Education des dames*, 1679, and Fénelon's *De l'Education des filles*, 1687. The first, however, appears not to have been turned into English; and the second not till 1707. It may indeed be a revival of some earlier English treatise, such as the very practical *Education of Young Ladies and Gentlewomen*, noted in *Term Cat.*, Mich., 1680.

²¹ Margaret of Austria. Cf. M. A. Prost, *Corneille Agrippa*, Paris, 1881, I, 161ff.

phlet deploring the spread of accomplished ignorance among women, and pleading not for female pre-eminence in general,²² but for a revival of the severe old-time education in arts and tongues and in the principles of religion. The Postscript announces the opportunity for such instruction in Mrs. Makin's own boarding-school.²³ The contrast is as obvious as it is conventional. One tract exalts the woman of society, for whom extended and perhaps superficial learning may combine with clever utterance and physical charm to win a high place of worldly influence. The other emphasizes learning for its own sake, or as a handmaid to religion.

French *préciosité* had just set up much the same opposing standards, in the *précieuses galantes* and *précieuses pédantes*,²⁴ distinguished with so much care by "a friend of the author" in his Preface to Somaize's *Grand Dictionnaire des Précieuses*, in 1661:

(1) "celles qui, ayant ou un peu plus de bien ou un peu plus de beauté que les autres, taschent de se tirer hors du commun; et pour cet effect elles lisent tous les romans et tous les ouvrages de galanterie qui se font. Toutes sortes de personnes sont bien venues chez elles; elles reçoivent des vers de tous ceux qui leur en envoient, et elles se meslent bien souvent d'en juger, bien qu'elles n'en fassent pas, s'imaginant qu'elles les connoissent parfaitement parce qu'elles en lisent beaucoup"

(2) "celles qui, ayant de tout temps cultivé l'esprit que la nature leur a donné, et qui, s'estans adonnées à toutes sortes de sciences, sont devenues aussi sçavantes que les plus grands auteurs de leur siecle et ont appris à parler plusieurs belles langues aussi bien qu' à faire des vers et de la prose."²⁵

Most of the living *précieuses* were only approximations to one or both of these hypothetical types, the great Scudéry herself professing equal scorn for pedantry and for romantic gallantries.²⁶ Outside the coteries, too, and hence uncele-

²² "To ask too much, is the way to be denied all," is the author's comment.

²³ Cf. the list of these studies quoted by Dr. Doran, *A Lady of the Last Century*, pp. 9-11.

²⁴ *Le Dictionnaire des Précieuses*, ed. Livet, Paris, 1856, I, xvi.

²⁵ *ibid.*, I, 8-9.

²⁶ V. Cousin, *La Société française au XVIIe siècle d'après Le Grand Cyrus de Mlle. de Scudéry*, Chapter on "Mlle. de Scudéry", *passim*.

brated in contemporary gossip, we must recognize a very considerable group of extreme *savantes*, averse to society and content with a life of scholarly and perhaps religious seclusion.

All these stages of French culture, theoretical and practical, were before the eyes of English women. Eagerly reading memoirs and romances, they accepted them as accurate portrayals of society. French comedy, equally accessible, offered the satirical point of view. A much-idealized Mlle. de Scudéry became celebrated among them;²⁷ and various other ladies, eminent in literature—as Mme. de Lafayette; in classical scholarship—as Mme. Dacier; or in Cartesian philosophy—as Mme. de Sablé, were well known and admired in England. Even without such acquaintance, there were similar conditions in the two countries to produce parallel developments. It is to be expected, then, that the English documents already listed should be disposed of by adjusting them to these two standards, of social activity and scholarly retirement.

Golborne's *Friendly Apology*, a serious effort to vitalize conventional material, maintains a purified social ideal, as indicated by the "Character of a virtuous and accomplished Woman" appended. De la Barre's treatise is another *tour de force*, the French original being followed in two years by an argument in rebuttal by the same author. The work before us is concerned chiefly with authorities pro and con. General equality is its theme; and education is made to serve the end of larger usefulness, in "the principal conditions and occurrences of life." Again there is insistence on woman's advantage in facility of expression, especially in letter-writing. Tate, to refute the stock charges of current satire, accumulates a mass of examples of the whole range of virtues, drawing his method from Montaigne's Essay on "Three Illustrious Examples of Female Virtue." Eminence in learning is duly considered, Mlle. de Scudéry and Orinda serving as prominent representatives. Three character-portraits are added.

Walsh's *Dialogue*, for all its pretensions, was regarded by

²⁷ Cf. the testimony of Ferrand Spence, in the dedication and preface of his translation of her *Conversations sur divers sujets*, 1683; also Tate's treatise, noted above.

²⁸ *De l'Excellence des Hommes contre l'Égalité des Sexes*, 1675 and 1692.

the women as a betrayal of their cause. The author of the *Defence of the Female Sex* disposes of the matter thus:

"But how much soever his Eugenia may be oblig'd to him, I am of Opinion the rest of her Sex are but little beholding to him. For as you rightly observ'd, Madam, he has taken more care to give an Edge to his Satyr, than force to his Apology; he has play'd a sham Prize, and receives more thrusts than he makes; and like a false Renegade fights under our Colours only for a fairer Opportunity of betraying us.

An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex belongs unmistakably in this same worldly class. It is presented as the author's "firstborn,"²⁹ suggested in a social conversation, and approved by ladies and gentlemen of culture. One of these, Dr. Drake, in some commendatory verses, greets the author as the natural successor of Orinda and Astrea, and recognizes her beauty as her most convincing argument.³⁰ Throughout, it is the social or "conversational" ideal that is emphasized. Mere scholarship is derided as pedantry, and foreign literatures—except perhaps French—are to be acquired by translations. Contemporary comedy and "the facetious dialogue of Mr. Brown" come in for praise, with only the slightest moral reservation. Once more accusing satirists are attacked with their own weapons, the method in this case being a series of character-portraits, ridiculing the faults of men. The contents, indeed, were of so popular a character as to call forth at least one prompt imitation.^{30a}

²⁹ At least two books by Mary Astell, the first part of *A Serious Proposal* and the *Letters concerning the Love of God*, appeared before 1696, but anonymously.

³⁰ "Long have we sung the Fam'd Orinda's praise,
And own'd Astrea's Title to the Bayes,
We to their Wit have paid the Tribute due,
But shou'd be Bankrupt, before just to you.

.....

If any yet so stupid shou'd appear,
As still to doubt, what she has made so clear,
Her Beautie's Arguments they would allow,
And to Her Eyes their full Conversion owe."

^{30a} Advertised in *The Post Boy*, no. 214 (Sept., 1696), following a notice of *An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex*....Second Impression:—"There is now published A farther Essay of the Female Sex. Containing Six Characters and Six Perfections. With a Description of

Mary Astell appears to be conspicuous in quite a different connection: as chief spokesman in England for the class of virtuous and learned ladies who fill the pages of Ballard's *Memoirs*; her own life, as there described, affording no unworthy example of such ideals. The two parts of her *Serious Proposal* advocate and explain her celebrated "Protestant Nunnery,"—"a retreat from the world for those who desire that advantage, but likewise an institution and previous discipline to fit us to do the greatest good in it." Appropriately enough, this discipline is evenly divided between the practice of devotions and a severe regimen of studies in philosophy and languages. As a philosopher, the chief aim of Mrs. Astell, in her letters to Norris, is to get the Platonism they both affect as far removed as possible from the worldly interpretations of society. Society is further condemned in the *Reflections upon Marriage*, this time for the bigoted inertia that tolerates the unjust relations of the sexes. Like the *Serious Proposal*, this is a document of practical reform, for which she "neither advised with friends nor turned over ancient or modern authors." Equal privileges are to depend on equal mental equipment, the result of equal education. In all these works the ideal of social conversation seems very remote; so much so that unless more specific external evidence is forthcoming, there appears to be little occasion to attribute the *Essay in Defence of the Female Sex* to the same author.³¹ In fact, of all contemporaries, Defoe most nearly catches Mary Astell's tone, in his "Project" for the education of women. His grim triangular academy, walled and moated, with its strict honor-system of government and its serious learning, was as little calculated to compromise with social

Self-Love. To which is added A Character of a Compleat Beau." For this reference I am indebted to Miss Florence M. Smith, of Columbia University, who is now at work on a study of Mary Astell.

³¹ In practice Mrs. Astell was probably not so uncompromising in her standards, to judge by her rather wide circle of devoted friends. In many respects, indeed—such as learning, purity of morals, anonymity, and attitude toward marriage—she suggests Mlle. de Scudéry; but the latter was pre-eminently a woman of the coteries. Only a comparative recluse would have received such treatment as is accorded Mrs. Astell ("Madonella") in *Tatler*, nos. 32 and 63.

gayety as was the "nunnery" which he pronounced doomed to failure.

Some compromise of ideals is indeed indicated in the last two documents cited. Lady Chudleigh, while following closely Mary Astell's theories on marriage and discussing equality with no little venom, is in general much more tolerant of polite society and its lighter literature, in both of which she bore a conspicuous part. Her *Defence* is a clever dramatic sketch, indicating acquaintance with Lucianic models and current satire. Tom Brown is disinterested but illuminating, directing his satire at the sex from every possible angle.³²

The dramatic pieces listed suggest some valuable lines of contributory evidence. *The Female Wits*, directed at three women—Mary Pix, Catherine Trotter and Mrs. Manley—who had become conspicuous as playwrights the previous year, expresses the hostile attitude of the time toward the encroachment of women upon man's traditional literary province. *A Commonwealth of Women* is a revision of Fletcher's *Sea Voyage* (licensed 1622), with its incidental and mildly satirical employment of the Amazon tradition. As the title indicates, the new play enlarges this feature considerably. The reminiscences of classic origin are all lost; the emancipated citizens of the commonwealth vote by show of hands, and wrangle over the succession; and their ruler delivers a fourteen-line address on the question of sex-equality, involving all the familiar arguments.³³ Besides, three comedy courtiers of the earlier play

³² "A Wanton Woman"; "The Modest Woman"; "A pretended Godly Woman"; "The Religious Woman"; "The Witty Woman"; "The prudent Woman".

³³ "They that say Women are not fit to Govern,
Betray their weakness, and their want of knowledge:
For what Perfection is there in the Male,
That is not in the Female: Grant, their Composure stronger,
Their Bodies Courser, and more fit for wars,
Which some of us, do haply contradict:
I cannot yet Conceive, why this should bind us
To be their Slaves; our Souls are Male as theirs;
And that we have hitherto forborn t'assume,
And manage Thrones: I say, altho' we have not
Challeng'd a Sovereignty in Arts and Arms;
And writ our selves Imperial, hath bin
Men's Tyranny, and our Modesty—not defects,
Or want of Judgment." (Act III, sc. 2).

become citizens of London, who go sea-faring to escape their wives, and are brought at last to appreciate the comforts of home. Finally, Wright's version of the *Femmes Savantes* is the closest of a series of English imitations of Molière, localizing the affectations of the "*savantes*" themselves with so much detail that there must have been no little reality to justify the satire. Most prominent are Crowne's *Country Wit*, Shadwell's *Bury Fair*, Congreve's *Old Bachelor* and *Double Dealer*, and Steele's *Tender Husband*. These plays, aided by certain occasional prose and verse of the period,³⁴ go far to corroborate what the more specific documents have already put beyond question: the existence in the last years of the 17th Century of a widely-extended movement to restore women to an equality of privilege, in learning and literature rather than affairs; a movement in practically all respects paralleling, and in part derived from the French activity of the period.

Bryn Mawr College.

A. H. UPHAM.

³⁴ e. g. in Gildon's *Miscellaneous Letters and Essays*, 1694: Cloe to Urania, against Womens being Learn'd (p. 55), and An Answer to the foregoing Letter in Defence of Womens being Learn'd (p. 57).